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ABSTRACT

Conflicting results have been obtained from studies examining childrearing attitudes, knowledge of child development norms, or perceptions of locus of control, and how these variables relate to parental discipline practices and to parent-child relationships. One way to clarify these inconsistent findings in the literature would be to examine the relationship between individuals' childrearing attitudes, perceptions of locus of control, and knowledge of child development milestones in the same study. This relationship was examined in a middle class sample of 29 male and 105 female college students. After written informed consents were obtained, subjects completed a demographic data form, the Parental Attitude Research Instrument (PARI), Levenson's Locus of Control Scale, and a questionnaire assessing Knowledge of Child Development Norms. Pearson product moment correlational analyses revealed that perceptions of internal locus of control were significantly related to the PARI subscale Comradeship/Sharing for females and that perceptions of chance control were significantly related to the PARI subscale Avoidance of Communication for females and for males. The results of the present study carry important implications for parent education programs. (Author/NB)

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Knowledge of child development norms, childrearing attitudes, and perceptions of locus of control

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Runninghead: Locus of control

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Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between individuals' childrearing attitudes, knowledge of child development norms, and perceptions of locus of control in a middle class sample. One hundred and thirty-four college students (29 males and 105 females) participated. After written informed consents were obtained, subjects completed a demographic data form, the Parental Attitude Research Instrument (PARI) (Schaefer & Bell, 1958), Levenson's Locus of Control Scale (1973), and a questionnaire assessing Knowledge of Child Development Norms. Pearson product moment correlational analyses revealed that 1) perceptions of internal locus of control were significantly related to Comradeship/Sharing $r(132) = .24$ for females 2) perceptions of chance control were significantly related to Avoidance of Communication for females $r(132)=.36$, $p < .001$. and males $r(27)=.51$, $p < .007$. The results of the present study carry important implications for parent education programs.

locus of control, perceptions, parent education

Knowledge of child development norms

There are several reasons why the topic of childrearing attitudes and how they might be influenced is an important area of research. A person's attitudes may have an impact on children and adults' behaviors in the home and this, in turn, may influence the child's cognitive and social/emotional development (Schaefer & Bell, 1958). Examining the correlates of childrearing attitudes may aid in the prediction of families who are high risk for child abuse or neglect (Altemeier, Vietze, Sherrod, Sandler, Falsey, & O'Connor, 1979). Also, an exploration of parents' and childrens' recollection of their parents' methods of discipline may further our understanding of the intergenerational cycle of parent-child relations (Wolfe, Katell, & Drabman, 1983).

The Parental Attitude Research Instrument (PARI) (Schaefer, & Bell, 1958; Schaefer, 1959) has been widely used in order to assess maternal attitudes towards childrearing. This scale is based upon a circumplex model or two dimensional organization of maternal behavior. One dimension is labeled affection (love vs. hostility) and another dimension is labeled control (autonomy vs. control). Based on research using the PARI as well as other attitude scales, investigators have found that individuals who endorse attitudes representing the extremes on either of these two dimensions may be at risk for dysfunctional family functioning.

In a recent extension of Schaefer's (Schaefer & Bell, 1958; Schaefer, 1959) work, investigators (Levenson, 1982; McDonald, 1971; Ramey & Campbell, 1976; Schaefer, Edgerton, & Hunter, 1983) have explored the hypothesis that the amount of control a mother or father feels that they have over their own lives may influence the development of autonomy in parent-child relations (Levenson, 1973; Levenson, 1982; McDonald, 1971; Ramey & Campbell, 1979; Schaefer & Edgerton, 1983). These studies have been conducted using Rotter's (1966) bipolar dimensionalization of the locus of control construct as well as Levenson's (1973) multidimensional measure of locus of control. Parents' nurturance, parents' consistency in discipline, parents' emphasis on educational experiences in the home and parents' democratic childrearing attitudes have been related to the development of perceptions of internal locus of control (Levenson, 1982; McDonald, 1971; Rotter, 1966). Parents' overprotectiveness, as well as parents' inconsistent or authoritarian methods of discipline have been related to the development of perceptions of external locus of control (Hetherinton, Cox, & Cox, 1981; Levenson, 1982; McDonald, 1971; Patterson, 1982).

There are several findings in the literature suggesting that parents' methods of disciplining their children may be influenced by their knowledge of child development. Education, a broad marker variable, has

been described as a positive mediating influence for females who broke the intergenerational cycle of family violence (Perry, Doran, & Wells, 1983). In a prospective study of high risk mothers, Altemeier and colleagues (1979) found that assessments of parents' knowledge of child development norms was not a powerful predictor of risk status for child abuse. Twentyman and Plotkin (1982) reported that abusive parents underestimated age appropriate behavior in their children compared to controls. Additional studies indicate that teenage mothers (Field, Widmayer, Stringer, & Ignatoff, 1980) and mothers of high risk premature infants overestimate their children's abilities. These unrealistic expectations have been related to teenage parents' authoritarian methods of discipline (DeLissovoy, 1973) and to cognitive delays in premature infants (Bee et. al., 1982).

One explanation for these conflicting results is that different instruments and scoring systems have been used across studies. Several investigations have focused upon maternal perceptions of children's behavior problems (Hetherington et al., 1980) or infants' feeding or sleeping disturbances (Bee et al., 1982) while other studies have collected information on mothers' expectations for children's acquisition of skills (Altemeier et al., 1979; DeLissovoy, 1973; Field et al., 1980). One way to clarify the inconsistent findings in the literature would be to examine

the relationship between individuals' childrearing attitudes, perceptions of locus of control and knowledge of child development milestones.

Individuals with an internal orientation may attempt to collect objective information about child development milestones if they view childrearing as potentially stressful or difficult. The person with an internal orientation may also observe the child in order to learn about age appropriate behaviors. Realistic knowledge will not predict life events. However, accurate perceptions suggest that a person will see a match between their expectations and children's behaviors in the home. In turn, these perceptions may encourage a person to be more flexible in their discipline, enhancing the development of autonomy in parent-child relations.

In contrast, it seems possible that individuals with perceptions of external locus of control will have unrealistic expectations for their children's development, deriving their standards of child appropriate behaviors without referring to the child's observable behaviors in the home. The person may impose absolute standards for their own behaviors as well. Inaccurate expectations would inevitably lead to a "clash" between perceptions and behaviors. As the person develops an awareness of the mismatch, he or she may emphasize strict discipline with children in an

effort to impose order in the home environment.

The hypotheses of this correlational study, derived from the circumplex model of maternal childrearing attitudes (Schaefer & Bell, 1958) were that: 1) individuals' perceptions of internal locus of control and individuals' accurate knowledge of child development norms would be significantly related to democratic childrearing attitudes on the PARI Rapport subscales (Equalitarianism, Comradeship/Sharing and Verbalization 2) that individuals' perceptions of external locus of control and individuals' inaccurate knowledge of child development norms would be significantly related to authoritarian childrearing attitudes on the PARI (Avoidance of Communication, Breaking the Will, Intrusiveness, & Dependency).

Method

Subjects

One hundred thirty four college students volunteered to participate. Subjects were recruited at the University of New Orleans married student apartments and from undergraduate psychology classes between April 1983 and December 1984. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Socioeconomic status of the participants (based on childhood family SES since the majority of subjects were

fulltime students) was calculated using the Hollingshead Four Factor Index (Hollingshead, 1975). Subjects' mean score on this index was 45.1 (SD=14.17). The mean age of the participants was 24.6 years (SD=6.72) and the subjects' mean educational level was 14.97 years (SD=1.44).

Procedure

After explaining the study, the principal investigator obtained written informed consents from each subject. In addition to providing family sociodemographic data, subjects completed three questionnaires: the PARI (Schaefer & Bell, 1958), Levenson's Locus of Control Scale (1973) and a questionnaire assessing Knowledge of Child Development Norms (Altemeier et al., 1979).

Measures

Parental Attitude Research Instrument (PARI) (Schaefer & Bell, 1958)

The Parental Attitude Research Instrument was designed to measure childrearing attitudes. Subjects are asked to "strongly agree," "mildly agree" "mildly disagree" or "strongly disagree" with 115 statements. Each of the 23 subscales of the PARI consist of 5 questions; scores are weighted and can range from 5 to 20 on individual subscales. Prior studies report that reliability coefficients for the subscales range from .45 to .86 (Schaefer & Bell, 1958). Becker and Krug (1965) summarized evidence indicating that individuals' responses on the PARI may

be strongly influenced by education and socioeconomic status.

Levenson's Locus of Control Scale (Levenson, 1973)

Levenson's (1973) Scale is a multidimensional measure of locus of control orientation. Three separate scales are used to measure locus of control: the Internal Scale, the Powerful Others Scale and the Chance Scale. There are eight items on each of the three scales, presented to respondents as one unified attitude scale of 24 items. Respondents choose 1 of 6 levels of agreement or disagreement for each question. Scores range from 0 to 48 on each scale. The reliability and validity of the Levenson Scales has been well documented (Levenson, 1981), ranging from .64 to .78. Factor analytic studies support the multidimensional view of the locus of control construct (Gurin, Gurin, Lao, & Beattie, 1969; Mirels, 1970).

Knowledge of Developmental Norms

Two recent studies on high risk mothers (Altemeier et al., 1979) and on teenage parents (DeLissovoy, 1973) utilized the questionnaire on Knowledge of Developmental Norms. Based on these investigations, preliminary norm data on Knowledge of Child Development milestones were available for scoring subjects' protocols. The questionnaire consists of 15 open-ended questions; answers in the acceptable range were scored 0, answers above the acceptable range were scored 1, while answers below the acceptable range were scored 2. Total scores ranged from 0 (accurate) to 30 (inaccurate). Also, the mean number of underestimates (expectations that a child's behaviors occur too late) and the mean number of overestimates (expectations that a child's behavior occurs too soon) were calculated for each

subject.

Results

The means and standard deviations for each of the psychosocial measures are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

A preliminary analysis consisted of examining the correlations among the sociodemographic and psychosocial variables. Due to the number of comparisons, only those intercorrelations significant at $p < .01$ are reported.

Males received higher scores on the PARI subscales Strictness $r(132)=.25$, $p < .009$ and Avoidance of Communication $p(132)=.23$, $p < .008$. Also, blacks received higher scores on the PARI subscale Fostering Dependency $r(132)= .29$, $p < .001$ and Breaking the Will $r(132)=.24$, $p < .005$ and obtained higher (more inaccurate) scores on Knowledge of Child Development Norms. There was no significant relationship between subjects' socioeconomic status, subjects' family structure/marital status or subjects' educational level and any of the psychosocial measures.

In the first major set of analyses, Pearson product moment correlations were calculated in order to examine the relationship among the psychosocial variables. These analyses revealed the following significant relationships: 1) Internality was significantly related

to Comradeship/Sharing $r(132)=.24$, $p < .005$; 2) perceptions of chance control were significantly related to avoidance of communication $r(132)=.36$, $p < .001$. Subjects' inaccurate knowledge of child development norms (overestimates or underestimates) were not significantly related to any of the PARI subscales or to Levenson's Locus of Control subscales.

Since there were sex differences on the PARI, correlational analyses for the three major psychosocial variables (PARI, Locus of Control, and Knowledge of Child Development Norms) were performed separately for each sex. For males, perceptions of chance control were significantly related to the PARI subscale Avoidance of communication $r(27)=.51$, $p < .006$. For females, Internality was significantly related to the PARI subscale Comradeship/Sharing $r(104)=.26$, $p < .008$; 2) the perception of chance control was significantly related to the PARI subscale Avoidance of communication $r(104)=.31$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The findings of the present study are consistent with prior research based on Schaefer's (1959) circumplex model of maternal attitudes. There was a significant relationship for females between perceptions of internal locus of control and the PARI Rapport subscale Comradeship/Sharing. This relationship did not hold for males. Perhaps males and females emphasize

different aspects of child management. As reflected in their relatively high scores on the PARI subscale Strictness, males may focus upon discipline. In contrast, females may recognize and place value on the friendships in parent-child relations. If people feel control over their own destinies, they may want to grant the same freedom to their children.

No significant relationship was found between the PARI subscales measuring authoritarian childrearing attitudes and the subscale Powerful Others. The majority of participants did not obtain high scores on measures of authoritarian childrearing attitudes or high scores on Levenson's measures of external locus of control. The subjects' relatively low scores may explain the absence of a relationship. Also, people who perceive that their lives are ruled by others may not assert themselves or convey authoritarian childrearing attitudes towards children.

Although the majority of individuals received the highest scores on the subscale measuring Internal locus of control, both male and female respondents' perceptions of control by chance were significantly related to Avoidance of Communication. Perhaps a person's perceptions of chance control stem partially from isolation. If an individual perceives that events are beyond their control, they may limit their contact with other people and inhibit children's attempts to

share feelings, further accentuating perceptions of chance control.

Contrary to our hypotheses, there was not a significant relationship between perceptions of internal locus of control and knowledge of child development norms. One explanation for this finding is that there was little variability in subjects' responses. Most of the participants received high scores on Levenson's Internal Locus of Control Scale and they were accurate in their-estimates of child development norms. A different pattern of findings may have emerged if there had been an assessment of respondents' perceptions of child behavior problems or if a high risk parent population had been studied.

The findings of the present study must be interpreted with caution. Although statistically significant relationships were found, a relatively low percentage of the variance in subjects' childrearing attitudes was accounted for by perceptions of locus of control or knowledge of child development norms. There may be other variables related to childrearing attitudes that were not assessed in the present study. Also, based on these findings, it is not possible to determine causal relations. Finally, the use of survey measures introduces potential biases such as social desirability, misjudgements, and the report of beliefs rather than of actual behaviors.

The results of the present study carry important

implications for parent education programs. Feelings of unpredictability may be accentuated by a lack of communication with others. A question for future research is whether persons who isolate themselves more often when problems arise in the home are high risk for parenting disorders. On the other hand, accurate knowledge of child development norms may prevent the development of unrealistic expectations, minimize perceptions of external locus of control, and reduce high risk parent's tendency to use authoritarian methods of discipline with their children.

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Table 1

Sample characteristics

	Frequency	%
Sex		
Male	29	22
Female	105	78
Race		
White	115	85.2
Black	14	10.4
Other	5	3.7
Family Structure		
Single	90	67.0
Married	44	33.0
Parental Status		
Nonparent	89	66.0
Parent	45	34.0

Table 2

Means and standard deviations for psychosocial measures

	Males (n=29)		Females (n=105)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Parental Attitude Research Instrument				
Verbal	16.21	2.64	17.71	1.86
Depend	9.52	2.72	9.64	2.53
Break Will	10.48	3.14	9.29	2.48
Strictness	13.72	3.33	11.93	2.74
Equal	15.17	2.12	15.58	2.14
Avoid	9.34	2.54	8.12	2.07
Intrude	10.38	3.05	9.42	3.05
Comrade	17.00	1.81	17.34	1.99
Levenson Locus of Control Scale				
Internal	34.79	5.78	35.49	6.07
Powerful Others	13.41	6.81	15.07	7.12
Chance	14.66	7.66	15.18	7.76
Knowledge of Child Development Norms				
Accuracy score	5.74	2.96	4.94	3.25
Overestimates	1.89	1.48	1.30	1.21
Underestimates	2.00	1.39	1.78	1.61

Authors' Note

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